

Wabash Valley Correctional Facility Offenders Reach out to Incarcerated Youths through an Original Adaptation of “Romeo And Juliet”

SHAKESPEARE IN SHACKLES is a voluntary Shakespeare program for long-term segregated offenders in Wabash Valley Correctional Facility’s Special Confinement Unit. The goal of this program, created by Indiana State University professor Laura Bates and designed in collaboration with segregated offender Larry Newton, is to show offenders how to use the plays of Shakespeare to examine their own character and explore alternatives to their criminal choices.

This year, the Shakespeare program took this approach one step further: reaching out to at-risk juveniles at WVCF and in the community, in the hopes of preventing future violence. An original adaptation of “Romeo and Juliet” was created by ten adult offenders in WVCF’s general population, most of whom came to prison for murders committed as teenagers. Because DOC policy prohibits interaction between adult and juvenile offenders, the performance was videotaped by the facility and shown to the YIA (Youth Incarcerated as Adults) unit. This month thirty-nine juveniles, aged 15 to 18, with sentences ranging from 6 years to 60 years, watched the 30-minute video and engaged in a lively hour-long discussion afterward.



Incarcerated Youths watch a Shakespeare performance.

The video opened with the offenders stating, “This is not the typical love story of Romeo and Juliet. This is the story of the violent society in which Romeo lived and the terrible choice he chose to make.” Each of the five scenes was followed by a break in the action, during which the juveniles were directly addressed by offenders in the video and given a key question to answer. These questions asked the juveniles to analyze the choices made by Shakespeare’s characters and were designed so as to prompt the youth to also examine their own, similar choices – and to find alternative, less violent, options.

The first scene presented a street fight among a group of Capulets and Montagues. The question was: *These people don't even know one another. Why do they feel such a "blind hatred"?*

The juveniles replied:

"They were trying to impress one another."

"They were raised in a way to be prejudiced."

"That's all they know."

The second scene showed Romeo's buddies coercing him to crash a Capulet party, despite his objections. The question was: *Why does Romeo give in to his buddies, when he doesn't want to go? Why do any of us?*

The juveniles replied:

"Some people have no role models to look up to, so they find the next best thing."

"The buddies is probably all he has."

"You think your friends care about you, but a lot of them don't."

The third scene was the party crashing, in which Romeo meets Juliet, but Juliet's cousin, Tybalt, feels so "disrespected" that he vows to kill Romeo. The question was: *In seeking Romeo's life, what is Tybalt really after?*

The juveniles replied:

"He wants to act or try to look tough"

"He wants respect and fame"

"To be in the spotlight"

The fourth scene showed Romeo's friend, Mercutio, joking about Tybalt's challenge. The question was: *Why don't Romeo's buddies try to stop the fight?*

The juveniles replied:

"Because they feel if they don't war, they would look soft."

"Most just don't think things gonna turn out the way they turn out."

"They're not true friends."

The fifth question came at the end of the play. Romeo's friend Mercutio lies dead on the ground, killed by Tybalt – who also lies dead on the ground, killed by Romeo. To the sound of sirens, officers run on and Romeo is handcuffed. He steps forward and states, "Shakespeare wrote this play 400 years ago, but it still applies to teens today." One by one, each of the adult offenders states his situation: "I was 16 when I was arrested for murder and I'm serving a life sentence...." The final question addressed to the youth was: *We know that you've felt enraged like Mercutio.*

We know that you've felt disrespected like Tybalt. And all of us have wanted to get revenge like Romeo. That's OK. Those are natural feelings. What matters is what you do about it. So, what are you going to do?

The juveniles shook their heads as they listened to the sentences of these teen-aged killers, and then they replied:

“Next time I will stay calm and think before I do something stupid.”

“Talk to the person I have a problem with.”

“Be the bigger man and walk away.”

“Sit down and think about the best possible solution.”

“Let it go – life in prison ain't worth it.”

In the words of the offenders who created this adaptation: “Our goal in choosing these scenes and raising these questions is to help at-risk juveniles make less tragic choices.” Judging from the juveniles' replies, this goal was attained.

SHAKESPEARE IN SHACKLES is currently preparing an adaptation of all nine of Shakespeare's history plays, drawing life lessons that offenders can learn from each of the kings of English history.

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